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Rochester's Political Trends An Historical Review

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There is a story full of interest and meaning in the shifting political tastes and sentiments of the city's electorate over the past century and a quarter. While a detailed account of the successive contests would require more time and space than we can take here — and perhaps bore everybody except the political antiquarian — a summary view of the fluctuations from decade to decade may quicken our awareness of the democratic functions we each perform, whether actively or passively, year in and year out.

Of course when the election returns show a persistent trend for a number of years we look for the continuing influence of an unsolved problem, the rising star of a political leader, the growing weight of a tradition, or the improved efficiency of a party organization or a pressure group. Sometimes two or more of these influences work in opposite directions at the same time, thus cancelling out or balancing each other; and again sometimes they work together in such fashion that it is difficult to say whether an able leader makes the issue or an issue makes the leader or the movement. Political trends in a city, state, or nation are always complex, yet this very complexity is a part of the challenge, a part of the value their analysis may have to the conscientious citizen, for nothing is more fundamental to our particular brand of civilization than an intelligent understanding of the political techniques by which we control our democracy.

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Foreign observers have long held the performance of local political functions in America under severe censure. We shall see from an historical survey of politics in Rochester that it was not always above reproach, and this is certainly not the time or the place to try to perfect the record by a skillful emphasis on only the more creditable features. However, it should not be forgotten that we are studying human responses to a confusing array of situations, some of which may completely escape our attention. We will therefore try to avoid hasty judgments — try at all events to apply our hindsight sympathetically, rather than cynically, always with the hope of lengthening our own perspective and developing a capacity to see issues and movements in depth, if not here fully in the round.

Although Rochester has long been known as a Republican stronghold, a close examination of the record will show that the balance between the two major parties has been closer than is generally supposed. The city since its incorporation in 1834 has voted Democratic for President 7 times in 28, or once in every four contests; it swung to Democratic governors 17 times out of 53, nearly a third of the time; 19 of its 54 mayors have been Democrats, though none served as long as several of the Republicans. Democrats held control of the council in 42 of the 117 years, but they seldom gained much influence on the school board; their opponents, Whigs or Republicans, likewise named most of the local representatives to Albany and won all but ten of the congressional elections in Rochester districts. In the latter two contests, however, an occasional Democratic majority in the city has frequently been overridden by a stronger Republican preference in the towns. Yet the balance has generally been sufficiently close to encourage each party to exert itself, not only during the successive campaigns, but during its terms in office as well. The electorate has retained a feeling of independence and a sense of responsibility for its choices.

There have been periods, to be sure, when this feeling of independence and this sense of responsibility have slackened. A willingness to "let George do it" has often prevailed, not only during the ascendancy of George Aldridge, but in other periods also. It never worked well that way, however, for issues soon arose which spurred the voters to reassert their independence, to re-establish their responsibility. Sometimes the initiative in revolt was taken by an indignant editor, and indeed throughout the first century of the city's political history there was always a sharp rivalry between partisan papers. At other times

the revolt was led by a group of non-partisan citizens convinced that neither party truly represented the public interest. Most frequently it has simply been a matter of getting out the voters, for the passive neglect of many citizens to exercise their franchise has characterized periods of complacency. Fortunately a free electorate has nevertheless survived, and although the city of Rochester has not contributed any great political leaders to the state or nation, it has maintained a vigorous local administration and has played a positive if minor part in state and national trends.

The Period of Hickory and Ash Poles

The political contests of pre-Civil War days were highlighted by the raising of Hickory and Ash poles — Hickory for Andrew Jackson and his successors, Ash for Clay and his fellow Whigs. Rochester streets saw several of each at almost every election from 1832 on, though the former seldom signalized a local triumph. Rochester's pre-Jackson contests had been few in number and generally non-partisan, for even those settlers who were at heart old Federalists posed as Jeffersonian Republicans by 1812 when the village of Rochester was founded. The local birth of the Antimasonic party in the mid-twenties is a special story, of interest here chiefly because of the possible explanation it affords for the small following Jackson attracted in Rochester as compared with most other frontier communities of that period. In a sense, Rochester had become a conservative eastern city even before it gained incorporation as a city in 1834 and before it had fully grasped the fact that it was a part of the East rather than the West.

It is of course inaccurate to describe the emerging Whigs as the conservatives, and the Democrats as the liberals or progressives, of the late thirties and forties, for in some respects the reverse was true. Thus in 1842, when Rochester first gave its majority to a Democratic governor, his election brought an end to a period of generous state expenditures on internal improvements and plunged the state into an era of sharp recession. The city did not again favor a Democrat for governor until the three-cornered contest of 1854, although in local elections that party held the advantage more frequently than its opponents throughout these years. The city never favored a Democrat for President in pre-Civil War days, and only one for Congress, but since the boisterous Log Cabin campaign of 1840 with its generous consumption of hard

cider was only an exaggerated phase of Whig campaigning, that party can hardly be characterized as staid or conservative.

The contests were vigorously fought on both sides, however, and with foul means as well as fair. Thus a local Whig letter of 1840 frankly called "Paddy a \$5 man who must be retained," while a local Democrat, writing a few weeks later, offered to transport several aliens to a friendly judge who would issue naturalization papers in time for the impending election. More characteristic and more significant was the development of political clubs — starting with the Hickory clubs of 1832 — organized in every ward by both parties in each succeeding national election. Party conventions made their appearance locally as early as 1827, political parades in 1840, and torch light processions in 1856. Political songs and mass meetings were popular from the beginning, but the first presidential candidate to address a Rochester audience was General Winfield Scott who attracted a throng estimated at 25,000 to Court House Square on October 14, 1852.

In some respects the political currents of this period did not run very deep — they often had the appearance of contests between rival bands, led by a few office seekers whose letters say less of issues than of prizes hoped for, such as a postmastership, an appointment as judge or a collector at the Genesee port. Yet, if we consider these contests on the basis of popular participation, the record is very good indeed. Approximately 84 per cent of all electors in Monroe County voted in the state election of 1834 and over 95 per cent of eligible voters in Rochester cast their ballots in the national elections of 1844. The performance dropped off in state and local elections, to 60 per cent in the contest over minor state offices in 1853, and to 72 per cent in the mayoralty elections of the same year, but it bounded up again in presidential contests and stood at 90 per cent in 1856 and at 96 per cent in the great contest in 1860.*

Specific issues sometimes played a large part in municipal contests. The Whigs generally favored an aggressive program of municipal improvements, but while this policy attracted favor, especially in years of expansion, the party's recurrent efforts to curb the liquor traffic alienated many voters, particularly among the newly naturalized Irish and Germans. The Whigs were the first to elect a foreign born citizen as

*The calculations of these percentages is based on the New York State census statistics of the number of potential voters in 1833, 1845, 1855, and 1865. We have averaged the increases for intervening years. No account has been taken of those who were ineligible because of local residence requirements.

mayor, John Allen of Ireland, in 1844, but they were not as generous as the Democrats in sharing their nominations with naturalized voters. Indeed it was largely because of the latter party's greater cordiality toward newcomers from abroad and more willing distribution of liquor licenses that it was able to control the city government in 14 of the 35 years before the Civil War.

Each party attracted many good and able leaders, but unfortunately the custom, practiced on both sides, of rotating the offices at practically every election frustrated the hope any individuals may have entertained of making a real contribution in this field. Prior to 1866 only two mayors served a second consecutive term, only one other a second term, and only one local congressman enjoyed more than two terms. A few able lawyers gained sufficient experience on the bench to earn distinguished reputations, but again none rose to the highest federal courts. Perhaps the majority were more interested in commercial and industrial enterprises, and certainly it was already becoming customary after the mid-forties for many nominees to withdraw, pleading the pressure of private affairs as an excuse for refusing public office.

There was of course no particular reason why Rochester should have produced a national leader at this time. The city was seeking no sectional favors, championing no popular causes. Local men and women were developing a special interest in the anti-slavery cause and in woman's rights, but the speeches and writings of Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony attracted little support as yet even in Rochester. The anti-slavery issue gave rise to a succession of minor parties, each of which found representatives in Rochester, but this city was not the center as it had been of the Antimasonic movement. Other third parties were active locally—the American or Know Nothing party nearly captured the city in the three-cornered contests in 1854 and 1855—but their importance was short lived.

The rise of the nativist American party was at least in part a reaction to the increasing influence of naturalized voters. From insignificant numbers in the early years they mounted to 43 per cent of the total in 1855, while the unnaturalized aliens of that date nearly doubled the city's voters. Some native leaders became alarmed and, organizing the American party out of remnants of the Whigs and other factions, elected a mayor and several councilmen that year, but the issue soon disappeared when the more pressing questions of an extension of slave territory and finally the right of secession gained the center of attention

nationally. Opinion swayed so far in the other direction after the outbreak of war that a state law of 1862 extended naturalization privileges to all aliens with one year's residence who were willing to enlist in the country's defense. So many took advantage of this provision in Rochester that by 1865 the majority of local voters were naturalized citizens, and the number of unnaturalized aliens was cut in half.

The Bloody Shirt Period

Rochesterians, like Americans elsewhere both North and South, learned from the frightful tragedy of Civil War how serious political decisions can be. The boisterous character of earlier elections had attracted wide participation without, however, teaching a respectful acceptance of majority decisions. The awful violence of the war and the bitterness it produced injected a grim vindictiveness in place of the good humor that had previously supplied a saving grace. Republicans abandoned the Ash poles and Log Cabins for the "Bloody Shirt" which they waved frantically throughout the sixties and seventies. Party alignments continued in flux for a dozen years after the war's outbreak, yet when a leader shifted sides, as many did repeatedly, he seemed to feel a compulsion to declare his convictions more stridently than ever before. A few years later he might be battling with equal vehemence in another lineup, but meanwhile it was a life and death struggle which could not so easily be abandoned for law or business as in the past.

The Bloody Shirt argument developed during the Civil War when it seemed logical to many Republicans to regard partisan opponents almost as traitors. Democrats in the South had seceded, and the efforts of old Democrats in the North to disguise themselves in Fusionists or Unionists were branded as deceitful. Yet popular confidence in Republican leadership was not strong, and the frightful reports that came back from the early battles shook that party's hold in Rochester. For the second time in its history the city gave a plurality to a Democratic candidate for Congress in 1862, although he was defeated by the Republican towns. The city elected Democratic mayors in 1862, 1863 and 1864, despite the loud protests of Republican editors against entrusting control of the city's enlistments to "Copperheads." The city also gave small majorities in these years to Governor Horatio Seymour, likewise dubbed a Copperhead by the *Democrat*.

That Rochester was loyal to the Union could not seriously be questioned, in view of its many sacrifices throughout the long conflict, yet the community's sympathies for the anti-slavery aspects of the struggle were decidedly lukewarm. Lincoln had carried the city by 888 votes in 1860, a majority of one per cent, but a state amendment granting the suffrage to Negroes had received less than two fifths of the local vote in the same election, and in 1864 McClellan carried the city against Lincoln by a plurality of 89 votes.

In spite of the deep sorrow and bitter indignation which followed the President's assassination, many of his late supporters were soon grappling at each other's throats for control of the party. Thus, when the Radical Republican, Roswell Hart, sought re-election to Congress in the late fall of 1865, the *Democrat* backed the Union party of moderate Republicans and Democrats which successfully replaced Hart by Lewis Selye. Inevitably, Selye failed to please all his supporters, and even the *Democrat* was soon openly hostile. Again, as late as 1871, when one Republican faction secured a nomination to the legislature for Frederick Douglass, Rochester's distinguished Negro statesman, a sufficient number of Republican voters swung to his Democratic rival, George D. Lord, to insure the latter's election.

Jarvis and George D. Lord, father and son of Pittsford, played a special role in Rochester politics during the post-war decade. They were Democrats and technically at odds with the Republicans who generally controlled the city council in these years, but they learned the art of working behind the scenes with one faction or another of that dominant but discordant party. The Lords secured repeated election as state senator or assemblyman and obligingly maneuvered several Rochester measures through the legislature. They were by vocation construction contractors chiefly interested in the lucrative contracts which the state was letting in a retarded effort to enlarge the Erie Canal. But they were not scornful of smaller contracts, and in the early seventies, when Rochester was at last ready to build a water system, the Lords pressed a bill through the legislature establishing a Water Works Commission from which they secured, secretly through an agent, a contract for the \$3,000,000 job themselves.

The early seventies were dark years as far as political morality was concerned, in Rochester as in much of the country. But if the boodlers could cross party lines to effect their ends, so also could the reformers. It was with Republican aid that Samuel L. Tilden, Democrat, won his

fight against Tammany in New York and compiled his evidence against the Canal Ring in Albany. In similar fashion, reform elements among the Republicans in Rochester, headed by Lewis H. Morgan, the city's most distinguished man of letters, persuaded a respected Democrat, Henry L. Fish, to run for Lord's seat in the Assembly in 1872. Fish had previously served two terms as mayor, elected by supporters from both parties who had joined to secure honesty and economy in municipal affairs, and now again he was successful, despite an alleged expenditure of \$40,000 by the Lords to defeat him. He arrived at Albany in time to assist Tilden in his exposure of the Canal Ring, including the Lords.

Seldom have political alignments been more jumbled than in the election of 1872. Several Rochester Republicans had joined the Liberal Republican movement which nominated Horace Greeley for President, and when the Democrats endorsed his candidacy the supporters of Grant became so alarmed that they solicited the aid of woman suffrage leaders. Susan B. Anthony of Rochester, believing that at last a genuine concession was to be made to her sex, addressed a number of mass meetings throughout the state, but her enthusiasm soon disappeared as the cordiality of the Republican managers declined with each new report of the rise of anti-Greeley sentiment. Miss Anthony returned in disillusionment to Rochester where an editor's formal call for all citizens to register roused her on November 1 to lead a band of fifty ladies to the registration booths. Fourteen of them actually cast their ballots in the face of official challenges on election day, and Miss Anthony stood trial a few months later on the charge of illegal voting, winning wide sympathy for her cause despite her conviction. Grant had meanwhile carried the city, leading his entire ticket to victory.

A feature characteristic of this period was the large influence of political journalists. D. D. S. Brown of the *Democrat* was often described as the Thurlow Weed of western New York. Lewis Selye, too independent to follow Brown's direction, established a new Republican paper, the *Chronicle*, in 1868 in order to maintain his influence. When Freeman Clarke attempted two years later to harmonize the warring factions in order to insure his own election to Congress, he had to purchase a controlling interest in the two papers, merging them as the *Democrat and Chronicle*. The *Express*, which had voiced Radical Republican views at the start, remained regular throughout these troubled years and stood by Grant until the end. Only in 1880, after the na-

tional convention had nominated James A. Garfield, did this paper develop an interest in reform. Its purchase two years later by the Ellwanger brothers diverted it, under the new name of *Post Express*, from partisan politics to business and culture. The newly established *Herald* became the crusading journal of the eighties and nineties, sometimes as a liberal Democratic paper, sometimes as a liberal Republican. The more strident *Times*, which first made its appearance in 1887, was to become in due season the official Republican paper, but its early days were marked by a shifting allegiance. Only the *Union and Advertiser* remained staunchly Democratic throughout these years. Yet the Democrats carried Rochester in four of the seven gubernatorial contests between 1870 and 1882. Tilden's strong pull as a reformer was largely responsible for this shift, for he carried Rochester once himself and paced Robinson to victory in 1876. Cleveland likewise won Rochester's favor in 1882.

Even the *Union and Advertiser* was sorely tried when, in 1884, the Democrats nominated Grover Cleveland for President. Its editor, William Purcell, was personally so disgruntled over the nomination that he refused to press the campaign until the unfortunate phrase, "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion," injected the religious issue and brought this staunch Catholic to his feet shouting. It was too late to reverse the local trend, however, for all the other papers had lined up for Blaine. The now independent *Post Express*, interested in free trade, was edited by Joseph O'Connor, but his Democratic inclinations were likewise checked by an old feud with Cleveland in Buffalo. The *Herald* was currently protectionist, as was the official Republican journal, the *Democrat and Chronicle*, at all times, while the *Times* joined the parade for the Plumed Knight too. Even the German language press joined the Republican chorus, which proved so strong that the rising tide of Democratic opinion throughout the nation gained little effect in Rochester. The county as well as the city had favored Cleveland for governor in 1882, but even the city decisively opposed him for President in 1884 and again in 1888. A popular Democrat, Halbert S. Greenleaf, gained a personal triumph by winning the local congressional seat in 1882, the second Democratic victory in that contest since the beginning, and won it again in 1890, but only one Rochester Democrat won a place in the assembly that year.

The Republican party's greater stability, following the election of 1872, enabled it to name the mayor every year until 1890. The Demo-

crats, however, gained control of the council in 1875 and held it continuously for fifteen years. This situation was not so destructive of municipal accord as might be supposed, for most of the executive duties were now consolidated in an Executive Board. Henry L. Fish, who as mayor had had his difficulties with a large and squabbling council, had secured legislative approval while serving at Albany for the new non-partisan board, and he became its first chairman in 1876, though he dropped out three years later when the board was reduced from six to three members and its non-partisan character was abolished.

The concentration of control over street improvements and other public works in this small body considerably reduced the importance of the mayor and the council and decreased the friction between them. Perhaps it was the small importance of his office that enabled Cornelius R. Parsons to hold on to the post of mayor from 1876 until 1890. A good mixer and urbane, Mayor Parsons developed a personal following that sustained him against several attacks within the party, despite the loss of local patronage to the Executive Board and through the application of Civil Service reforms to the police and other local services in the early eighties. Yet the Mayor's seven unprecedented elections failed to win him the real power in Republican circles, for that was rapidly slipping into the hands of young George Aldridge, first elected to the Executive Board in 1883 where he laid the foundations for a new type of political leadership.

Service in the civil and political fields was in fact becoming a lifetime calling during these years. Men in both parties were now standing repeatedly for election as aldermen or supervisors, and the successful ones were advancing after a few years to the assembly and other more coveted posts. Four rose from seats in the state assembly to Congress, and one Rochester man, Henry L. Fish, after long and able service in local offices, was considered as a candidate for governor, only to be passed over for Cleveland in 1882. His irregularity in opposing Lord in 1872 was one handicap, for party regularity was now becoming a fetish, taking on some of the sanctions loyalty to the Union had enjoyed immediately after the war.

Important reforms in the ballot law were achieved in 1890. The old practice of permitting each party to print its own ballots had not only discouraged voters from splitting their tickets but had made it difficult for a citizen to vote in secret and thus had encouraged the widespread buying of votes. Indeed the corruption of the polls had become

so prevalent that unscrupulous supporters of individual candidates had on several occasions reprinted and distributed hundreds of their opponents ballots with the name of their own candidate substituted for that of his rival, thus misleading or confusing unwary voters. Long protests against these and other practices finally prompted the state legislature to adopt the Australian ballot, and voters in Rochester first used official ballots printed by the public in November, 1890.

The voters themselves continued to shift about from time to time, though not as hectically as in the past. But if they were losing some of their previous independence of choice, they were beginning likewise to lose their zeal. Scarcely 86 per cent of eligible voters in Rochester cast their ballots for president in 1876, in contrast to the 96 per cent in 1860. About 92 per cent turned out in the presidential contest in 1888, the high water mark of voting participation in this period, but less than 63 per cent took part in the important mayoralty contest in 1886.* Moreover the deficiencies, whatever they were, could no longer be laid so reasonably to the immigrants, for the proportion of naturalized voters had fallen to less than a third, though the vote of first generation Americans now provided another and larger third.

The Aldridge Period

While the years 1890 to 1922 can best be characterized as the Aldridge era, we should not overlook the activity during this period of many forces which pulled in a divergent direction, redirecting and ultimately superseding the Aldridge influence. The very rise of a political boss stimulated the hostility of independent spirits, and only a remarkable capacity to learn and to compromise enabled George Aldridge to maintain what was increasingly characterized as a benevolent leadership. Yet maintain it he did, in defeat as well as in victory, and perhaps the true character of this boss comes out best in his ability to reassemble and regroup his forces after each setback, thus re-establishing his control on a sounder basis than ever before.

The city did not become aware of the rising power of the Aldridge regime until the early nineties. At its first appearance a group of civic

*The New York State Census for 1875, and the United States Censuses for 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930 and 1940 give the number of males of voting age, from which the number of unnaturalized aliens has been subtracted and the eligible voters for the intervening years calculated roughly as a basis on which to compute these and later percentages.

reformers, led by John Bower and strongly supported by the Chamber of Commerce, sought a new city charter to abolish the Executive Board and make the mayor the responsible executive. Obstacles were thrown in their path at every turn by the Aldridge faction, quite content with its control over the Executive Board, and the charter reform was not effected until the White Charter for second class cities took effect in 1900.

George Aldridge had meanwhile decided to seek the city's official leadership himself when he announced his candidacy for mayor in 1894. The *Herald*, which had switched to the Democratic side two years before, featuring the first of a long series of political cartoons by John Scott Clubb, many of which lampooned the Boss in a light but sardonic fashion, applauded lustily as a group of independent citizens formed a Political Reform Association pledged to support any good candidate named in opposition to Aldridge. The Association recommended two possible candidates, James G. Cutler, a Republican, and H. S. Greenleaf, the Democratic ex-congressman. The Democrats nominated the latter, but in the heated campaign which followed the friends of the Boss triumphed. Perhaps it was true that three Democratic ward leaders swung their support to Aldridge (they were dropped by the party a few months later). In any event the reformers were sufficiently challenged to undertake a more effective organization themselves.

The Good Government movement was the result, and within a year clubs were formed in every ward and a central Committee of 65 was organized. Over 500 registration books were circulated and nearly 5000 signatures were secured. By September, 1895, the new force, under the inspired leadership of Joseph T. Alling, was ready to challenge the Boss. A slate of candidates was prepared, including names of trusted men from both parties, but headed by a popular Democratic judge, George E. Warner. The *Democrat and Chronicle* and the *Post Express*, which had followed the new movement with skepticism, greeted this announcement with indignation and cried out with bitter scorn when the *Herald* and the *Union and Advertiser* persuaded the Democratic party to endorse the entire slate. The Republicans accepted only one name from the ticket, that of Samuel B. Williams, a long-time Republican, for treasurer, and gave its first place to Hiram H. Edgerton, a staunch Aldridge friend. It was the first time the municipal and state elections coincided, which seemed to favor the dominant party. The Republicans actually carried all state and local contests with easy ma-

majorities except the post of mayor, which fell to Warner — a clear victory for the Good Government forces.

Yet it was by no means a decisive victory. With the Aldridge forces in control of the council and the Executive Board, there was little the Mayor could do but deliver resounding veto messages. The council passed most of its measures over his veto, but the public was increasingly impressed, especially by his refusal to confirm appointments that had not been processed through the Civil Service Board. The Mayor won support as well for his fight to check the school board's use of patronage. These and other stands proved popular, with the result that, at the next election, the Good Government and Democratic candidates carried the city in a heated contest that brought out 88 per cent of all eligible voters. Mayor Warner led the ticket (save for Treasurer Williams, still unopposed), but he was followed closely by James Johnston, a long-time Republican, now the Good Government and Democratic nominee for the Executive Board. Only the Board of Education remained securely in Republican hands.

Unfortunately the Good Government and Democratic forces could not work together. The Democrats had in fact long been divided into two factions, one of which had learned to work quietly with Aldridge. Mayor Warner's efforts to win its support, which he needed in order to get the essential appropriations and other necessary measures through the council, aroused the outspoken Johnston, who could never brook compromise. Soon the administration was hopelessly split apart. The *Herald*, which had been the strongest backer of the Good Government forces, stuck by the Mayor, while the *Union and Advertiser* became anti-Good Government from the eve of the election. The *Post Express* espoused Johnston's course, and the *Democrat and Chronicle*, previously scornful of the "Goo Goos", became more friendly as the prospect of drawing them over to the Republican side brightened.

Indeed, with the rise of Theodore Roosevelt among Republicans in the state, independents in the party were alert to win a good government alliance wherever possible. Alling and Johnston were invited to visit Roosevelt in 1899 and returned with a determination to find candidates acceptable to Aldridge as well as their own backers. Finally the name of George A. Carnahan was proposed and accepted, and he was duly elected mayor by a majority of 3000 in a sweepingly Republican year which restored that party to power in all branches of government.

But Republican power was not what it had been in the early nineties. The strength of their Good Government allies could not be denied, for the contrast between Republican weakness in municipal contests and Republican strength in national elections during the late nineties was striking. In the crucial election of 1896, for example, when the silver-tongued Bryan attracted such unexpected support elsewhere, he got less than two fifths of the Rochester vote, less by a thousand than the locally unpopular Cleveland had received four years before. McKinley, despite the rising power of the Democratic and Good Government forces, received a vote of 18,250 — much the largest ever yet given to a candidate in Rochester — and carried the entire Republican slate to victory. Approximately 91 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballots — a record only exceeded in this period by the McKinley-Roosevelt ticket four years later, when 93 per cent turned out.

There had been some disappointment in Rochester over the composition of the state ticket in 1896. Many friends of Aldridge had hoped to see him nominated for governor. They had urged a state nomination two years before, and Aldridge's subsequent appointment as State Superintendent of Public Works had been accepted as only a partial recognition of his merits. David Jayne Hill, formerly president of the University of Rochester and now an aspirant for an ambassadorship, was prepared to nominate Aldridge, but Platt, the state boss, strongly preferred Frank Black of Troy, and Aldridge again stepped aside. Black received party support in Rochester during the election, and the fact that he trailed McKinley by a thousand votes could probably be attributed to the Democrats who bolted their party only to vote against Bryan on the free silver issue. Indeed, in view of the frenzied attacks on that plank, it was a marvel that Bryan received any votes at all.

Although the Good Government forces took no direct part as yet in state and national contests, the Republican candidates attracted smaller pluralities in 1898 than for many years. The fact that Black had removed Aldridge from his state job under criticism may have had a depressing effect on the local party's zeal. Even Theodore Roosevelt, the dashing Rough Rider at the head of the Republican state ticket, received only a 568 plurality in the city, where three out of six local Republican Representatives trailed their Democratic rivals and gained their seats only because of strong support in the towns. Perhaps the explanation lay in the greater solidarity of local Democrats in this

election, backed as they were by three of the five papers and the Good Government forces in the municipal contest.

The 1898 election was interesting for another reason. Rochester, as the home of the pioneer manufacturers of voting machines, had experimented with a number of these machines in 1896, but the results had not been too satisfactory. Improvements in the old machine and the addition of a totally new invention had stimulated many competitive tests which had helped to eliminate a number of defects, and by 1898 Rochester was fully equipped with 73 voting machines which worked with such perfection that the city's vote was tabulated ahead of any other city, thus supplying a great boon to a new local industry.

But if the Republicans with the aid of the Good Government forces had re-established complete control over all branches of government by 1900, they were no more successful than the Democrats in achieving internal harmony. The favorite goal of the Good Government forces had been to free the school board from politics, and they believed they had achieved this with the creation of a small board under the Dow Law and the election to it of trusted citizens, including Professor George M. Forbes and Mrs. Helen B. Montgomery. Trouble developed within three months, however, when the new board undertook to review the selection of texts, which had long been given to a politically favored publisher. The superintendent stood by his earlier policy and, when the board moved to replace him, an unexpected clause in the Dow Law was cited which safeguarded his position. Further study revealed that the clause, absent from the law as originally drafted and approved by the city and the legislature, had been inserted in the final printed draft by a clerk who claimed he did it at the request of George Aldridge. Aldridge denied the charge, but tempers were mounting on all sides and a complete rupture was only just avoided when the discovery of a petty speculation of funds by the superintendent prompted that official to resign and cleared the way for a progressive reform and development of the school system.

Before this issue was finally clarified, a rift had developed between Aldridge and Congressman James O'Grady, who had ventured to distribute a few federal appointments without consulting the Boss. The conflict did not break into the open until Aldridge announced his selection of J. Breck Perkins as O'Grady's successor, at which point the latter began to solicit support for his own renomination. Among the Republicans who took O'Grady's side in this struggle was Mayor Car-

nahan who had already received resignations from two on his cabinet and proceeded at this point to fill the vacancies by friends of O'Grady.

Mayor Carnahan's task was certainly a difficult one. The new city charter, which abolished the old Executive Board, had consolidated all executive functions in the Mayor's hands. He had launched the new government with the appointment of a strong cabinet, some of whom, notably James G. Cutler as Safety Commissioner, had proved too strong for his control. Cutler among others was glad to step out when the storm clouds began to gather.

The big conflict between the Mayor and the Boss developed when Aldridge appeared in Rochester as manager of the newly organized Citizens Light and Power Company which sought permission to lay a new system of conduits in several streets. The Mayor had announced that no new conduits should be laid, that the owner of the old conduits would be compelled to rent space to all applicants, and, failing that, the city should exercise its option to buy up the existing conduits. When Aldridge supporters pressed a franchise through the council, the Mayor promptly vetoed it. It was in the midst of this struggle that Mayor Carnahan commenced his campaign for renomination, with the backing of the *Post Express* and several Good Government leaders. A heated primary fight took place, in which the insurgents polled 5215 votes to 6575 for Aldridge. Carnahan and his supporters were definitely out, but the Boss was convinced that some real concessions to the Good Government forces would be necessary if he hoped to win in the fall.

Apparently George Aldridge now finally decided to abandon all efforts to control the Board of Education. The Good Government candidates for that board were all re-nominated and the posts of treasurer and comptroller were promised to Williams and Johnston respectively, provided their Good Government friends would support the Boss's candidate for mayor, Adolph J. Rodenbeck. The proposal was debated at length, but since many Good Government men would not agree to the full ticket, all club members were released to vote as they saw fit, an arrangement agreeable to the Boss. In the election which followed the Republicans swept the city, but George Aldridge must have given thoughtful attention to the fact that while the two men in his lineup who were favored by the Good Government forces won by majorities of 2897 and 4177, Rodenbeck, his own choice, secured only a scant plurality of 76 votes.

The Rodenbeck administration was scarcely any more peaceful than its predecessors. The stormy petrel this time was Comptroller Johnston, whose careful examination of all expenditures uncovered numerous technical irregularities and some disturbing outlays which the Mayor found hard to explain, such as the continuous employ of numerous street sprinklers throughout the winter months. So acrimonious were the disputes between Johnston and Mayor Rodenbeck, that Johnston finally broke with the administration and announced his candidacy for state committeeman from the Rochester area, a post long held by George Aldridge. Johnston received the support of both Carnahan and O'Grady and many Good Government Republicans, but he was soundly defeated in the primaries, carrying only two out of 21 wards.

Johnston continued as comptroller to harass the administration for another year, and finally in 1903 organized a new Citizens party which nominated him for mayor. Although Boss Aldridge had received a new Albany appointment, as secretary at \$6000 a year to the newly created Railroad Commission, he had not relaxed his control over the local party. The criticism which had greeted this new appointment and the revolt of the Citizen's party made it doubly urgent that the Republicans name an outstanding candidate for mayor. Aldridge found such a candidate at the last moment in James G. Cutler who had been spending a year in Europe and was as a result somewhat free of entanglements in the recent political squabbles in Rochester.

In naming Cutler for mayor, Aldridge must have faced the fact that he was nominating a man who would be wholly independent and devotedly committed to an energetic campaign for Rochester's improvement. Appeals for patronage, petty jealousies, and niggardly provisions for public services would have to give way to large and generous programs for the public welfare. It was to be a business man's administration, but Cutler was a business man with an optimistic, expansive outlook, who believed that a city, like an industry, profits more by investing than by hoarding its talents. Whether Aldridge really knew his man when he named him is not certain, but many in the Good Government clubs did, and although some of them wished to support their old associate, James Johnston, while others hoped to see ex-mayor George E. Warner, the Democratic candidate, win again, many thrilled at the prospect of securing a strong mayor who could lead the city forward with an effective program. The Committee of 65 failed to agree on an endorsement, leaving the members of the Good Govern-

ment clubs free to vote as they saw fit. Alling himself spoke in Cutler's behalf, and in the final vote Cutler won with a plurality of 13,013 to 12,103 for Warner and 6523 for Johnston.

Mayor Cutler entered office with a Common Council stacked 11 to 9 against him, but such was his personal magnetism and administrative skill that he easily rallied a majority for most of the many programs he launched — for park improvements and expansion, for new schools, a reorganization of the fire and police departments, and numerous other measures. George Aldridge seldom appeared on the local scene, and when the time came for a new election the party awaited only Cutler's consent to run again. Once he had given it, the Democrats, unable to find a party man of standing willing to run against him, accepted James Johnston, the Citizens party nominee who also received the backing of the new Prohibition party. The *Times* had meanwhile become the official Aldridge paper, as vituperative in defense as it had once been in attack on the Boss. Now there was none left to attack, for both the *Union and Advertiser* and the *Herald* gave Cutler their support in 1903, with the result that he won by a 4400 plurality and transferred his minority on the council to a majority of 15 to 6.

Moreover the Aldridge regime had at last found a Congressman in J. Breck Perkins whose interest in national and international affairs was so strong that he had no time to interfere with patronage. He was readily re-elected in 1902, and again in 1904, 1906 and 1908. Theodore Roosevelt's campaign for President attracted chief interest in 1904. Roosevelt's forthright statements and vigorous policies engendered wide enthusiasm in Rochester, and while he was not popular with all politicians, he had, when Governor, avoided clashes with Aldridge, and the latter was, if not enthusiastic, at least not hostile to his re-nomination. All parts of the Republican party joined to make his election in 1904 one of the most overwhelming on record — only Harding in 1920 and Coolidge in 1924 exceeded his majorities. The Republican marching clubs blossomed out in attractive uniforms and contributed much to boosting Roosevelt's total to 22,067 as against 12,339 for Parker, with 85 per cent of all voters participating.

Over-zealous Republicans gave the Democratic *Herald* a fighting issue in July, 1906, when they redistricted the county, carving out five assembly districts with fantastic boundaries designed to assure their party perpetual control of all assembly seats. But in September, when the state Democratic convention named William Randolph Hearst for

Governor, Louis M. Antisdale of the *Herald* was even more outraged and swung his paper's support to Hughes instead. Even the *Union and Advertiser* refused to endorse Hearst, and the Democrats had to bring out a special campaign sheet in order to present their case. Nevertheless, Hearst's two visits to Rochester, during which he addressed six mass meetings assembled with the aid of several bands, attracted more enthusiasm than the one dignified appearance of Charles Evans Hughes. Everybody was astonished when Hearst actually carried the city with a plurality of 296 over Hughes, although the Republicans carried all other contests in Rochester except one assembly district.

If there was any behind-the-scenes knifing of Hughes, it was well concealed, and two years later, the Governor won a clear majority in Rochester. The situation could not have been too pleasing to Aldridge, however, for he had lost his position as Railroad Commissioner at \$8000 a year (to which he had been advanced in 1905) when the somewhat questionable activities of that body led to its reorganization as the Public Utilities Commission. Aldridge had expected a reappointment, but Hughes decided to name an entirely new commission. The hard feelings thus created had local repercussions when Aldridge ditched Cutler, a friend of Hughes, for his own more steadfast supporter, Hiram H. Edgerton, as candidate for mayor in 1907. The *Herald* and the *Union and Advertiser* waged a forceful campaign for William Ward, Democratic candidate, who made a close run but lost to Edgerton by 1134. That Aldridge still nursed a grudge against Hughes was evident the next year when the Governor got only 22,769 votes in Rochester although Taft received 24,046 for President. The Governor's unflinching and successful battle against legalized gambling had, however, considerably reduced his popularity in political circles, and Congressman Perkins, who had spoken out in his support, shared some of his disfavor in this, his fifth congressional run.

George Aldridge over-estimated his power the next year when, on the death of Congressman Perkins, he announced his own candidacy for that seat. He had easily re-elected Edgerton to his second term as mayor, against a strong rival, and he had at last ousted the troublesome Mrs. Helen B. Montgomery from the school board, in spite of the protests of many Republicans, but the smoldering resentment against boss rule did not break forth until the special election of April, 1910. Levy S. Richard, editor of the *Times*, which supported Aldridge, resigned from his paper to become campaign manager for James S. Havens, the

Democratic candidate opposing the Boss. The *Herald* dug up a story of a \$1000 check received by Aldridge several years before in payment for a legislative favor to an insurance company. Aldridge answered the charge, stating that the money had been used for the good of the party, but many were unsatisfied. Several ministers and even President Rush Rhees of the University of Rochester spoke out for Havens, and the Democratic party employed detectives to check all registrations from cheap downtown hotels in an effort to break up an alleged plan to vote several hundred floaters several times. Numerous irregularities were uncovered, and such was the popular indignation that Aldridge was soundly defeated, in the towns as well as the city.

Governor Hughes remained discreetly silent over the Aldridge defeat, but he responded readily to requests for an investigation of illegal voting in Rochester. Numerous cases were examined and sixteen indictments were ultimately issued by a special grand jury. The *Herald* suggested that fear of further investigation contributed to a drop of 9 per cent in registrations for the next election, though it looks in retrospect more like the traditional off-year apathy. Reform was in the air, however, and a special school was set up to train election inspectors. Ex-President Roosevelt came to Rochester to help heal the wounds of past conflicts and to restore local Republican morale. His contagious enthusiasm worked magic, and the city not only gave Henry L. Stimson a good majority over John A. Dix for Governor but also returned its congressional seat to the Republicans with the election of Henry G. Danforth.

Local Democratic forces reached a low ebb in 1911 when the nomination of the apparently unbeatable Edgerton caused all regular party men to shun the contest for mayor. A young professor of citizenship at the University, Howard T. Mosher, consented to run, but he was snowed under, for the zeal of the Good Government forces had finally petered out. The percentage of voters participating dropped to 64, practically where it had stood before the reform movement boosted it into the high eighties fifteen years before. Most of those who turned out rallied to the support of Mayor Edgerton whose administrations, following the Cutler pattern, were giving Rochester cause to be proud of its parks, its schools, its health department and several other phases of municipal housekeeping.

Indeed the local Republicans were now so securely entrenched that even the split in the national party in 1912, when Roosevelt broke

loose and ran as a Bull Moose against President Taft, failed to shatter their control locally. Woodrow Wilson carried the city by a slight plurality but with scarcely one-third of the votes cast, and carried the county in similar fashion, while Governor William Sulzer won an even slighter plurality over his two Republican rivals; yet Danforth and Thomas P. Dunn, Republicans, won the two congressional contests Rochester now participated in, and local Republicans retained all but one of the legislative seats. Perhaps the most surprising feature of this election, in view of the issues and the excitement involved, was the stay-at-home vote, which exceeded 30 per cent of those eligible.

Because of a split in their own ranks, local Democrats lost an opportunity to profit further from the division among their opponents. One Democratic faction, allied with Tammany, was disgruntled over Sulzer's nomination and election as Governor, but rejoiced when state boss Murphey secured his impeachment. Their local opponents within the Democratic party, headed by Antisdale of the *Herald*, were disillusioned by this experience, and failed in 1913 to persuade either Havens or Cutler to stand as a Fusionist candidate for mayor. George E. Staud who did accept the nomination was able to cut Edgerton's previously high pluralities only by 60 per cent.

A year later the Republican sweep was even more decisive as they carried all state and local contests, an achievement they now repeated for several years in succession. President Wilson lost the city as well as the county in 1916, and, except for a few councilmen and supervisors, no Democrat won an election in Rochester until 1922, when two sudden deaths brought the Aldridge era to an end. George Aldridge went first while still at the height of his power and but a few months after his appointment by President Harding as Collector of the New York Port; Hiram H. Edgerton followed quickly, shortly after retiring at the end of his seventh term as mayor.

The Aldridge regime had not only survived repeated attacks on its policy and its integrity, some of which had been temporarily successful and had led to reform, but it had also managed to juggle several hot issues which might easily have brought disaster. Its policies on temperance and woman suffrage never satisfied all the independents, but the Democrats seemed even less satisfactory. George Aldridge had refused to support the woman suffrage amendment, yet he did win favor by naming a woman on every school board ticket from 1899 on, while the Democrats consistently opposed such nominations. Neither party

avored prohibition, but the Republican candidates were more frequently known for their personal temperance habits. Thus the Republicans successfully adjusted themselves to the increasing popularity of these movements, riding with the incoming tide of new women voters and temperance enthusiasts. They lost nothing when the state suffrage amendment was defeated in Rochester, 18,297 to 13,340 in 1915, and again by half that margin two years later, but they stood ready to welcome the new women voters in 1918 when the state amendment first took effect. The party increased its registrations in the next four years by 30,000 while its less cordial rival added only 4300. Some prohibitionists, dissatisfied with the stand of the major parties, organized an independent party, yet they seldom attracted more than a thousand voters away from the major candidates. The Socialist vote sometimes reached two or three thousand, attracting more perhaps from the Democrats than the Republicans, but the big loss of the Democrats was clearly the result of their failure as the opposition party in Rochester to get out the vote.

The Last Three Decades

The Republicans as the dominant party in Rochester have been challenged more frequently by events than by local opponents in the past three decades. There have been exceptions, such as the successful career of Meyer Jacobstein who captured the congressional seat three times in a row when Republicans carried practically all other local contests. Alfred E. Smith's second campaign for Governor, which played up the mounting hostility to the Volstead act, likewise carried Rochester in 1922 and may have assisted Jacobstein in his first contest, but the latter won when Smith lost in Rochester two years later, and won a larger majority than Smith again in 1926. Apparently it was at least in part a matter of getting out the vote, in which Jacobstein's abilities fully met the test.

Yet the percentage of voter participation slumped to an all-time low during the early twenties and remained down until the newly enfranchised women commenced to assume their responsibilities.* From as low as 52 per cent in 1922, participation began a slow climb during the late twenties, pulled along by the vigorous campaigning of Smith and Franklin D. Roosevelt on the state level, both of whom carried

*Although women of voting age in Rochester exceed men by 5 or 6 per cent, the number of women who register still trails the men by 10 to 20 per cent during the last five years.

Rochester for governor, Smith on two occasions. The onset of the depression gave politics a new urgency in the thirties. It was early in 1933 that President Roosevelt first reached out to speak to citizens all over the land in his famous fireside chats. But it was not until the popular New Deal leader, who regularly carried Rochester in these years, was seriously challenged by a strong opponent, Wendell Willkie, that the number of voters participating reached the respectable level of nearly 80 per cent. Unfortunately Rochester has not approached that figure in any other election during the period — a sad contrast with earlier times.

The sure hold of the New Deal on Rochester's favor, despite a general belief to the contrary, was evident not only in President Roosevelt's unflinching majorities in the city, and his three victories in the county, but also in the repeated majorities given by the city and sometimes the county to Governor Lehman and Senator Wagner, and the election of Democratic congressmen in 1934, 1936 and 1944. Much more surprising was that party's continuing strength which carried the city and, with the aid of the Liberal party, the county for Harry S. Truman in 1948. Whether because of resurgent factionalism within their ranks or because of the new strength brought to the Republicans by the rise of Thomas E. Dewey in state politics, the Democrats in Rochester lost in congressional and gubernatorial contests fairly regularly during the forties. The rise of the American Labor party in 1936, which immediately took first place among the several minor parties, was another indication of Democratic disunity though its vote seldom approached 10 per cent of the total and was never enough to swing the election in Rochester either way. The Republicans, moreover, had consistently held one congressional seat and most assembly posts and had retained their standing as majority party in most municipal elections.

A sharp break with the Aldridge era in municipal administration had occurred in 1925, when the City Manager referendum was approved 38,755 to 25,767. Old guard Republicans had opposed it and lost, but enough Republicans had supported the movement to make its victory bi-partisan. Moreover, in spite of efforts to eliminate party designations from local elections, well-known Republicans, some of them friends of the city manager movement, gained complete control of the new 9-man council. Stephen B. Story, an able engineer and leading proponent of the reform, was selected as the first City Manager

in 1929, but his program of widespread municipal improvements called for enlarged expenditures, which encountered increasing criticism as the depression gripped Rochester. The experiment with non-partisan government went out with Story in 1931, and the Republicans, who took over with two short-term managers, were themselves swept from office in the political upset of 1933. Yet the Democrats, who gained control of the city the next January, soon fell to bickering over questions of policy and leadership, and by 1939 the Republicans were able to re-establish party control in Rochester.

The Republicans have maintained their control in generally quiet elections during the past dozen years, partly by virtue of the efficient and economical administration they have given the city during a period of retrenchment. They have prided themselves most and been most praised for success in reducing the city debt to a point of practical extinction. Some of the city services have as a result been forced to rest on past laurels, but the Democrats have made no effective indictment of the policy. Republican leadership, under a succession of county chairmen, has remained quietly but effectively in the background. The character of the leaders, none of whom aspired to the heights sought by George Aldridge, partly explains their success, but the absence in Rochester during this period of a strong opposition press has had its effect too. Indeed the arrival of Frank E. Gannett in 1925 and his progressive absorption of the five warring dailies into two staunchly Republican papers has had far reaching influence on the political life of Rochester during the last quarter century.

It is too early to appraise these more recent developments historically. We need the hindsight of the next decade or so in order to decide which developments are important, in order to determine, among other things, whether the lack of editorial debate over issues and candidates has been compensated for in other ways, whether a balanced budget can become the sound basis for the continuing civic improvements so essential to a wholesome community, whether the decline in voter participation can be checked and reversed before a mood of complacency and irresponsibility sets in. Experience at least has taught us that conscientious citizens, inspired by forthright leaders, can rise to worthy heights of popular participation in government, can devise effective methods of debate and reach responsible decisions that foster the community's welfare.

